

Mechanical Failures

Ken Raines

The old man shimminates and coughs
along the shoulder of the road
and veers like the wobble in the wheel
that brought his Airstream to a stop.

He limped it in to Morgan's shop,
and Morgan said he'd see what he
could do. "Just pull around in back,
there, Stranger. This may take a while."

Three decades on, and still he's parked
out back, where every break of day
he lights the propane stove and listens
to the hiss beneath his frying eggs.

He starts a bottle of Jim Beam
for lunch and waits, perhaps, for parts,
thinking of the years since he first noticed
the air was gone from all the tires.

Sometimes he wakes in the afternoon
when radials crackle on gravel and glass
as the wrecker drags another husk
or burned-out shell around in back.

If Morgan is driving, as he passes,
he honks and points at the wreckage and cackles,
"Sooner or later . . . sooner or later . . .
There, Stranger, it's gonna catch us all."

The old man fumes, and profanity gathers
in the back of his throat. But before it can rise,
he forgets what he meant to say, at least
until he sees Morgan again.

And every day the old man totters
along, weaving among the hoods
and the domes and the naked transmissions and rims
that have come to hem him in.

But when he turns for home, he sees
the gleam of sunset on his Airstream,
that stainless, fat torpedo sleeking
through the pitted chrome and twisted steel.

And though his sense of direction has come
unmoored, he glides by engine blocks
and jumbled obstacles worn smooth
in the slow currents of long habit.